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The Lack(anians)

Use and misuse of a concept between psychoanalysis and science

The Lacanians vs. Science

A spectre is haunting the current theoretical debate in psychoanalysis – the spectre of techno-science. It has become almost a cliché in Lacanian circles to portray the contemporary domain of science as a “foreclosure of the subject of desire.”¹ What does it mean? Science, or better its contemporary neoliberal offspring, techno-science – as they like to say – at the peak of its social power and recognition, would be responsible for reducing human experience to a transparent and calculable object.

The Lacanian psychoanalytic *doxa* seems to be concerned with the pretension of contemporary cognitivist-influenced psychology to possess the “objective data.” The latter’s “compulsive drive toward measurement” and its overuse of quantitative statistical models in order to “control,” “categorize,” and “channel” the patient would represent a model of cure where the psychic suffering is reduced to “a void of knowledge that has to be filled with information from the therapeutic Other.”² It is nevertheless surprising how in the majority of cases from a comprehensible ideological critique of the contemporary dominant medical apparatuses we are suddenly thrown into an utter rejection of scientific rationality. As stated by a prominent Italian psychoanalyst, Fabio Tognassi (sadly exemplary of a common conviction in the Lacanian community):

The discourse of science – the discourse oriented toward absolute knowledge – aims at revealing the quote of rationality embedded in the Real; it aims at covering with the veil of the signifier – the veil of causality (*causalità*) – the realm of the unexpected (*casualità*). And in doing so it gets rid of what by definition is

¹ Massimo Recalcati. *L'uomo senza inconscio. Figure della nuova clinica psicoanalitica*. Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milan 2010.

² Fabio Tognassi, “Soggetto e sapere: la misura dell’Altro,” in *Psico-Pratika*, no. 26, 2006.

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destined to remain outside of the domain of the Other: *Das Ding*, i.e. what is impossible to be assimilated to knowledge.³

The discourse of science would be responsible for a complete reduction of the Real to the domain of the signifier. Its normativity would constitute a typical example of human ὕβρις: the rejection of the limits imposed by the Real on human experience. Moreover, science would erase the ethical status of the unconscious trying to reduce it to a fully constituted ontological (and because of that, symbolically intelligible) object.

Experience demonstrates this: a form of analysis that boasts of its highly scientific distinctiveness gives rise to normative notions that I characterize by evoking the curse Saint Matthew utters on those who make the bundles heavier when they are to be carried by others. Strengthening the categories of affective normativity produces disturbing results.⁴

In more appropriate Lacanian terms, the fundamental accusation can be summarized as follows: the image of nature addressed by the discourse of science is characterized by the rejection of sexuated subjects. The Lacanians accused scientific formalization of reducing the sexuated dimension of *parlêtre* to silence. According to this view, the *parlêtre* would expose the impossibility of the realm of the signifier (the Other of scientific discourse) being able to write a formula of *jouissance*. In other words, there is a *singular* relationship to *jouissance* rejecting any pretension of universalization and structurally excluded from the realm of the Symbolic.

Thus far we have been addressing the Lacanian *doxa*. But how incorrect is it to accuse the Lacanian *field* as a whole (that is, the field opened up by the teachings of Jacques Lacan and not necessarily inherited by his offspring nor directly imputable to Lacan's seminars) of subscribing to this naïve and unacceptable representation of scientific endeavour? If we say that scientific rationality operates a systematic erasure, or foreclosure, of the subject of desire, are we subscribing to a fundamental Lacanian proposition or are we rather incorporating (*perniciously* incorporating, we are tempted to claim) an ideological rejection of

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1992, pp. 133–134.

science that has nothing to do with the psychoanalytic field itself? Is it correct to say, as Miller seems to believe in *Clarification*, that the task of psychoanalysis is to bring back to the surface what science forecloses from its discourse? That psychoanalysis is, in a sense, the reversed side of science? Is psychoanalysis destined to play the part of the analysis of the formations of the unconscious of scientific discourse? Is not science – the ideological Lacanian would claim – perhaps full of slips of the tongue, symptoms, unsuccessful concealments of the singularity of the scientist? Is not its presumed imaginary universality full of traces of the subject of the unconscious who makes it possible while at the same time being rejected from its field (*suture*)?

Our thesis will rather go in the opposite direction: science does not represent the successful concealment of the subject of the unconscious, but rather the most blatant proof of its existence and productivity. If we define the expression “subject of the unconscious” deprived of all the inevitable (and hard to die) imaginary and ideological representations and we reduce it to the core of its objectivity, we will have nothing but a practice of de-imaginarization. We used the term “practice” because the subject of the unconscious is not a substantialized entity that we need to approximately approach with increasingly accurate clinical knowledge, but rather a hypothesis that orientates a never-ending process of de-imaginarization and creation of non-imaginary thought. The term “objectivity” (rather than “productive illusion,” for example) should be understood in all its anti-empirical stance: it is “a conquest and a task, which means that its progress recalls a common root between the theoretical and the ethical.”⁵ If psychoanalysis and science has such a common root, it relies on a counter-intuitive and anti-imaginary form of thought that equals the subtractive action of separation from the imaginary with the creation of the New.

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The crude simplifications that characterize the contemporary Lacanian *doxa* are not simply a sign of misunderstanding or inaccuracy in the reception of the Lacanian text. They rather indicate, sometimes even in a symptomatic (that is, contradictory) form, a hesitation that characterized Lacan’s teaching from the very beginning until the end. As if the relationship between psychoanalysis and science had followed different paths that never reached a satisfactory synthesis.

⁵ Jean Petitot, *La filosofia matematica di Albert Lautman*, in AA.VV. *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, vol. 15, pp. 1034-1041.

When faced with such a crucial epistemological problem, we are left with attempted yet unresolved paths which allow for many different Lacanian projects (both clinically and theoretically) that sometimes feature very few elements in common until they barely resemble each other. The unacceptable equation of science with the foreclosure of the subject of the unconscious coexists with the Cartesian subtractive definition of the subject itself; the statements about science as a paranoiac pretension of reducing the Real to the signifier are followed by an endless endeavour in order to never separate psychoanalysis from the project of formalization; the accusation addressed to science of it being ideological is accompanied by a procedure of transmission of psychoanalysis which is very reminiscent of the process of the axiomatization of formal knowledge. In the following paragraphs we will try to delineate some of these paths in order, primarily, to elucidate how the missed encounter between science and psychoanalysis might have ever occurred. It is our conviction that a critique of the misappropriations and simplifications of scientific rationality by the Lacanian community can be addressed and partially resolved via the internal conceptual resources of the Lacanian field itself. It is an indication – we hope – of another possible alliance of Lacanian psychoanalysis and science which is as necessary today as it was almost fifty years ago when the attempt of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse* group went largely ignored by the followers of Jacques Lacan, remaining so through the following years and up until today.

The Cartesian subject of the unconscious

If we consider only the interventions directly made by Lacan himself and not the contributions of many of his pupils, colleagues, and collaborators, the epistemological question in psychoanalysis has been addressed primarily (and almost exclusively) in the last text included in the *Écrits*, arguably one of the most important of the entire collection: *Science and Truth*. The article was specifically written as an *overture* for the first issue of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse* and was meant to give a significant orientation for the development of the journal. Lacan nevertheless decided to read the article at the first session of Seminar XIII, *The Object of Psychoanalysis*, on 1 December 1965, in what was to become probably the year when he dealt most profoundly with the relationship between psychoanalysis and science.

In this crucially important article Lacan does not make a direct pronouncement concerning psychoanalysis's vocation as a science. Contrary to what Freud struggled for during his whole life, at this point of his teaching Lacan does not put much faith in the possibility of formalizing psychoanalysis according to a scientific protocol. He rather underlines that "the subject upon which we operate in psychoanalysis can only be the subject of science."⁶ It is important to stress such a preliminary remark, without which there is only confusion in the relationship between science and psychoanalysis. Even though the debate regarding the Freudian project of a scientific expression of psychoanalysis does not seem to have ceased even nowadays – many psychoanalysts underline the necessity of psychoanalysis being formalized in a scientific manner – Lacan takes a different path. He rather states the crucial importance of the relation of psychoanalysis to the *field* constituted by modern science – not to science itself – and he claims that without that field any form of psychoanalysis would not be possible. It would be meaningless to ask under which conditions psychoanalysis can be considered a science; what does matter for Lacan is how the *field* constituted autonomously by science creates the conditions of possibility for psychoanalysis.

This is why it was important to promote firstly, and as a fact to be distinguished from the question of knowing whether psychoanalysis is a science (that is, whether its field is scientific), the fact that its praxis implies no other subject than that of science.⁷

As claimed by Jean-Claude Milner:

With regard to the analytic operation, science does not play the role of an ideal – possibly infinitely distant – point; strictly speaking, science is not exterior to psychoanalysis, it structures in an internal manner the very matter of the object of psychoanalysis.⁸

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⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Science and Truth*, in Id., *Écrits*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York – London 2006, p. 729.

⁷ *Idem*, p. 733.

⁸ Jean-Claude Milner, *L'Œuvre claire: Lacan, la science, la philosophie*, Seuil, Paris 1995, translation in English (by Oliver Feltham) of Chapter 2 in Jean-Claude Milner, "The Doctrine of Science," in *Umbr(a): Science and Truth*, no. 1, 2000, p. 35.

Instead of dealing directly with an epistemological question regarding psychoanalysis itself, Lacan here establishes the common ground that coordinates what is nevertheless a separation between science and psychoanalysis. Lacan rather underlines that in the field inaugurated by modern science, identified here with the figures of Galileo and Descartes, it is possible to deduce a particular figure of the subject, which is the same subject upon which psychoanalysis as a practice operates. What is it?

Lacan identifies modern physics with a specific operation: the elimination of every contingent quality of existents in the description of the world. Therefore, a theory of the subject of science repeats the same gesture. The characters of the particular individual, be they psychic, somatic or intellectual, are stripped down. As Milner puts it, the subject of science “is neither mortal nor immortal, neither pure nor impure, neither just nor unjust, neither sinner nor saint, neither damned nor saved”⁹: it does not have consciousness, interiority, or reflexivity. Science carries out a cut in order to *separate* the subject from the individual. All the qualitative contingent determinations are erased in order to isolate a pure *non-specific* core. This is what the *cogito* makes possible: it is an operation of minimal subtraction from every positive attribute. Lacan, following Koyré, designates the historical moment when this act of *coupure* emerged for the first time in Descartes. Such is the scope of the Cartesian doubt: the suspension of the certainty of every identifiable particular in order to make the void place of enunciation emerge in all its clarity.

But the eliminativist gesture is only the first movement of the *cogito*, the other – which is specifically Lacanian – is the identification of this subtracted void with thought. Lacan’s postulate claims that there is an unbridgeable distance between thought and knowledge. They belong to two completely different fields. Thought appears only when all the positive qualities of knowledge are stripped down. While the *cogito* is “the defile of a rejection of all knowledge.”¹⁰ Lacan’s original re-interpretation relies on its equation with a thought without qualities: a pure void act of subtraction. The gesture of thought is not the positive correlate of an imaginary consciousness, but the erasure of any positive determination until what remains is only the subtractive clarity of a generic *place*. It is in this

⁹ Jean-Claude Milner, “The Doctrine of Science,” op. cit., p. 38.

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Science and Truth*, op. cit., p. 727.

precise point that Lacan traces the continuity between the gesture inaugurated by modern science and the birth of psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud. If the subtractive subject of science appears at the moment when the positivity of knowledge is cast into doubt, psychoanalysis represents the path *par excellence* in order to be faithful to this groundbreaking discovery. What do we have in the symptoms if not an act of castration of the positive certitude of consciousness's knowledge? If there is a thought in the dream, in the *wiz*, in the slip of the tongue, is it not it at the expense of every positivity of imaginary knowledge?

In order to develop the conviction of the subtractive dimension of the unconscious, it is mandatory to accept a preliminary remark: as we assumed the separation between knowledge and thought, we also have to accept *the complete separation between knowledge and the unconscious*. The unconscious does not have anything to do with positive knowledge. To put it in simple terms, the unconscious does not know anything.¹¹ Against a widely diffused opinion, for example very popular in Jungian-influenced circles, the unconscious is not an archive of past experiences, nor an archaeological storage of traumas, nor an accumulation of hidden and repressed images and tropes (which when brought to the collective level necessarily become archetypes). This is the reason why Lacanian-oriented clinical psychoanalysis is never based on the *interpretation* of the unconscious. Lacan was utterly clear in claiming that psychoanalysis does not have anything to do with hermeneutic interpretation, i.e. the practice of bringing the surface of a symptomatic formation to the deep causes of its emergence. If this were possible, it would be necessary to postulate a positive substantialized stratum of intelligible causes that could be reconstructed through the analytic process. Unconscious would in this case be a hidden positive articulation of causes, images, repressed elements, etc. It would be *something*, and not a pure void, as the Cartesian/Freudian subtractive gesture suggests. Psychoanalysis would be the clinical act of unveiling this hidden secret core and the end of analytic therapy would be the successful appropriation of *something* deposited in the profound of one's own personality.

¹¹ "Witness [Freud's] break with the most prestigious of his followers, Jung, as soon as the latter slipped into something whose function can only be defined as an attempt to reinstate a subject endowed with depths (with an "s"), that is, a subject constituted by a relationship—said to be archetypal—to knowledge." (Jacques Lacan, *Science and Truth*, op. cit., p. 728.)

We will see on the contrary that Lacan will develop a very different theory of the end of analysis far from any “correspondence” with an already existing hidden stratum of causes (knowledge) and consequential to the definition of the unconscious as a subtractive void. Psychoanalysis is not about “knowing the secret of oneself.” But if the unconscious is void and deprived of any positive determination, what would be the Lacanian understanding of the clinical “experience of the unconscious”? How would it be possible to have the experience of the “rejection of all positive knowledge”? Lacan’s answer is that if psychoanalysis is not an experience of knowledge, nor a reconstruction of a hidden past, it cannot but be an experience of *truth*. In which sense?

We will address this point in the following paragraphs. For now let us recapitulate once again the Cartesian-Lacanian definition of the subject as derivable from *Science and Truth*: if the hypothesis that there is a subject of science and that it emerged with modern science and that it is identified with a subtraction from every positive determination of knowledge is correct, then this subject is the unconscious. And conversely, *in the unconscious there is thought*. Psychoanalysis is an experience of thought as truth, separated from the acquisition of positive knowledge.

As rightfully synthesized by Alain Badiou:

What *still* attaches Lacan [...] to the Cartesian epoch of science is the thought that the subject must be maintained in the pure void of its subtraction if one wishes to save truth. Only such a subject allows itself to be sutured within the logical, wholly transmissible, form of science.¹²

Jean-Claude Milner – letter and contingency

In order to unpack the rather elusive remarks on the ensemble of these concepts (subject, science, truth, thought, and the unconscious) we will now refer to two historically important Lacanian contributions not directly made by Lacan on this topic. Both of them were highly influential in the way the relation between psychoanalysis and science has been thought and developed over the last thirty years within the Lacanian community. They are: Jean-Claude Miller’s

¹² Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, Continuum, London – New York 2005, p. 432.

work *L'Œuvre Claire*, published in 1995, wherein the Lacanian legacy of Koyré is analysed in all its consequences regarding the relationship between mathematics, the letter, and contingency; and Jacques-Alain Miller's early piece *La Suture: Éléments de la logique du signifiant*, published in 1966 in the first issue of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, wherein the question of the relation between subject and science is analysed.

Jean-Claude Milner, in a commentary on *Science and Truth* in chapter 2 of *L'Œuvre Claire*, derives some more consequences from the preliminary identification of the subject of science with the subject of the unconscious. According to Milner, in the famous Galilean aphorism – “The great book of the universe is written in mathematical language and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures.”¹³ – the accent should be put on the written dimension of language. The discipline that constitutes a point of reference for modern science is philology, not mathematics:

In Galileo's eyes, mathematics and measure were the means [...] that would allow humble physics to one day equal what the prestigious philology, through the science of language (via grammar), and through the science of written documents, had, long ago, accomplished.¹⁴

The ideal precision of modern science, for Milner, was therefore linked to the idea of translating the empirical object with its equivocal confusion into a *literal* and precise entity. The Cartesian subtraction is equated with a reduction to a pure literal expression. What is interesting here is not so much the reductive reading of Galilean science operated by Milner, who reduces the object of science to the “set of what exists empirically,”¹⁵ but the way through which the *letter* is surreptitiously put at the ideal centre of a scientific endeavour. Galilean science becomes, for Milner, an indefatigable search for precision in order to elevate the empirical object to the level of the letter. Only a literal science can be a precise one. The technical instrumentation is aimed at extracting from the empirical equivocality of reality the clear precision of the letter. They are the instruments for reducing science to the model of philology.

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¹³ *Il Saggiatore* §6 cited in the edition of C. Chauvire, *L'Essayeur de Galilée*, Annales Litter. Franche-Comte, Paris 1980, p. 141.

¹⁴ Jean-Claude Milner, “The Doctrine of Science,” op. cit., p. 42.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 41.

But according to Milner, the discontinuity created by modern science in reducing the world to the *letter* requires some further clarifications. Psychoanalysis cannot limit itself to being dependent on the established common ground between its clinical practice and the field opened up by scientific modernity. Is psychoanalysis, after all, only a secondary-degree discipline, subject to the domain of modern science? And even more, is it possible to link psychoanalysis to a historical event such as the contingent emergence of modern science?

According to Alexander Koyré, Galilean science can be understood only historically, that is, negatively when put in a relation of opposition to and difference with the ancient episteme of the Greeks. The latter, modelled on an understanding of mathematics as a necessitated series of demonstrations, was devoted to isolating from the empirical world that object which, in all necessity and for all eternity, cannot be other than what it is. It was an epistemology according to which a complete science would thus be the science of the most eternal and necessary object, i.e. the celestial bodies. This necessitates a conflicting and unresolved dialectic between a mathematical demonstrative practice entirely devoted to logical necessity, and the realm of the empirical, which in all its diversity and equivocity is intrinsically rebellious to mathematics. The realm of Being, in the Milnerian/Koyrean understanding of the ancient Greek episteme, would be divided, ontologically not less than axiologically, in different degrees of perfection: from the contingency of bodily existents, to the Supreme incorporeal Being of God (necessary, perfect, eternal).

Galilean modernity is defined by an epistemological break from such an epistemology. Modern science can spell out all the empirical without concerning itself with any hierarchy of being, and it can do so with the *letter*, i.e. via a calculation practice. While for the Greeks mathematics guaranteed direct access to the eternal, modern science makes use of a completely different mathematics which – as *letter*, insists Milner – it is able to grasp the diverse in its quality of being incessantly other. The empirical is not degraded as a lower form of being, but rather literalizable *as* empirical. The defining feature of Galilean science is thus not the fact of it being mathematical, or at least not more that it already was with the ancient episteme (“in certain regards, modern science is even less so”¹⁶). The discontinuity is represented by the emergence of a *particular* dimension of

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 47.

mathematics: its being a *letter*. From a mathematics based on demonstration, modern science is defined by calculation. But what is even more important is that while the Greek episteme was aimed at elevating the equivocality of contingent beings to the heights of celestial bodies, modern science is completely lacking any axiological preoccupation (“one thing [...] is sure: if ethics exists, science has nothing to do with it”¹⁷). The letter is able to grasp the empirical as empirical; it looks at the contingent as contingent.

Milner’s problem is the nature of the difference between mathematics as necessitated demonstrative practice and mathematics as a literalization of contingency. As a strenuous structuralist thinker, he cannot accept that the break of modernity is merely a historical event. And it is at this precise point that his path distances itself from Koyré. According to him, Lacan in *Science and Truth* is still too indebted to a Koyrean historical concept of discontinuity, a mistake that will be corrected only a few years later with the theory of discourses. In order to purify his reflection on science and psychoanalysis, Lacan needs to develop a non-chronological articulation of the concept of the break.

Undoubtedly, the emergence of a new discourse, the passage from one discourse to another (what Lacan terms the “quarter turn”), in a word, the change, can be an event; these events are an object that historians attempt to grasp in the form of chronology. But they are not what historians say they are. [...] In itself, the quarter turn has no need to inscribe itself in a historical series.¹⁸

Once Lacan has been able to develop a non-chronological theory of the break, it is possible for Milner to derive a non-chronological theory of the epistemological break of modernity without relying on any specific historical event. The science of the letter is just a figure of the possibility to grasp contingency as such. The problem is not the passage from the Ancient episteme to modern science, but how science, far from being an instrument for reducing the empirical to the same, is in fact an instrument for grasping what can be infinitely other than what it is.

But what then, according to Milner, is the specific relation of the letter with contingency? And why would the letter be able to grasp the infinite mutability

¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 49.

¹⁸ *Idem*, p. 51.

of contingency? In its invariability, the letter, in fact, may look similar to the eternal idea of the ancient episteme. But the opposition should be searched for somewhere else. Milner claims that the immutability of what, like the letter, *has no reason* to be other than it is, is different from the immutability of what, like the celestial bodies, *cannot*, without violating reason, be other than it is. There would thus be a substantial nonconformity between the necessity of the laws of science and the necessity of the Supreme Being, even though at the imaginary level it is nowhere to be found. Is it not in fact true that the laws of nature as described by the empirical sciences may look like necessitated and eternal laws, as if they were expression of a Supreme and Eternal Being?

Science operates on an equivocity of the empirical that at any time and at any point can be infinitely other than it is. Nevertheless, when the letter intervenes, it fixes it as it is,¹⁹ and it may give the impression that the empirical cannot be other than what it has become. In other words, science fixes the contingency of the empirical in a necessitated law, even though the condition of the second moment relies on the infinite possibilities of the first. Paraphrasing Mallarmé's *Coup de dés*, Milner claims that in order for a point of the universe to be manifested as it is, "requires the dice to be thrown in a possible universe wherein this point would be other than it is."²⁰ There is therefore a specific intertwining between contingency and necessity. Necessity constitutes the operation that science conducts on the infinite possibilities of contingency.

But here Milner suddenly clarifies his own thesis: in the interval of time when the dice tumble before falling there is "the emergence of the subject, which is not the thrower (the thrower does not exist), but the dice themselves insofar as they are in suspension." At the moment when the mutually exclusive possibilities face themselves, the impossible emerges as a figure of contingency in the flash just after the fall of the dice when the number cannot be another one. The passage from contingency to necessity has a vanishing mediator, which is

¹⁹ It is on this point that the much more convincing reflection of Quentin Meillassoux on the meaningless sign diverges from the relation between letter and contingency in Milner. For Meillassoux, the letter of formal languages (which he takes care to differentiate from the letter of everyday language) has the ability to grasp the hyper-chaotic contingency *as* contingency: that is, without converting it into the actualized necessity of the laws of natural sciences. See Quentin Meillassoux, *Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign* (unpublished paper).

²⁰ Jean-Claude Milner, "The Doctrine of Science," *op. cit.*, p. 54.

the tumbling of the dice, i.e. the subject. When the letter fixes contingency in a necessity, it imposes the erasure of these infinite possibilities, marking them as impossible. Necessity takes the place of contingency as much as impossibility takes the place of infinite possibilities. Science fixes this point and it forbids the return to the contingent. Psychoanalysis and science here deviate from each other: according to Milner, the former constitutes the persistent contestation of contingency against its own erasure by the laws of the latter. The letter is fixed, but at the same time it refuses to be subjugated to the regime of the Same as in the ancient episteme. The famous Freudian statement according to which the unconscious does not recognize that time should be understood in these terms: the unconscious does not recognize the conversion of contingency into necessity as operated by the fixing of the letter by science.

Jacques-Alain Miller addressed the same point regarding the well-known paradox of contingent futures.²¹ Sophism explains the conversion of contingency into necessity as follows: from the point of view of today, an event may or may not take place tomorrow (*possibility*). Tomorrow, in the eventuality that it does take place, it will always have been true that it took place. And it will be *necessary* that it has always been true that it took place (*impossible that it did not*). Miller underlines how the conversion of the possible into the necessary is an effect of retroaction, and psychoanalysis is concerned precisely with this backward temporality of past signification. In the temporality of the unconscious, contingency does not cease to haunt its conversion into necessity. According to Miller, the linear time of science is the time of the transformation of possibility into actuality, but there is also the retroactive temporality where the impossible (what has not taken place) refuses to be completely excluded (“foreclosed,” Lacan would have said) and is still effectively operative *as impossible*. Psychoanalysis constitutes the objection against the exclusion of the impossible from the realm of the necessary. Or in other words, the subject of psychoanalysis constitutes the *exception* of the linear progression of the temporality of science.

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The erasure of this retroactive temporality of the contingent subject of the unconscious from the fixed letter of science has some specific consequences in the relation between psychoanalysis and science. While Lacan claims that science

²¹ Jacques-Alain Miller, “Introduction to the Erotics of Time,” in *Lacanian Ink* 24/25, Winter/Spring 2005, pp. 18-19.

was responsible for opening up the field for the emergence of the subject, it seems that it also closes it down with the prescription of the inopportunity to return to the contingent. *Science and Truth* bears the trace of this double movement that also exposes the uncertainty and hesitation in Lacanian thinking of the doctrine of science. Later in the text, Lacan reiterates the conviction that something in the status of the object of science “remained unelucidated since the birth of science.”²² This object is none other than the pivotal element around which the theory and practice of psychoanalysis revolves: the notion of *objet petit a*, i.e. *the causal dimension of truth*. Lacan is not afraid to define it “the breaking point”²³ where the path of science and psychoanalysis diverge (“the truth as cause being distinguished from knowledge put into operation”²⁴). Science allows the delineation of the crack between knowledge and truth, but at the same time it keeps it veiled and it persists in the illusion of joining them together. Science should thus be blamed primarily for forgetting: forgetting the trace of the infinite contingency that the letter fixes, but also for forgetting the dimension of truth that psychoanalysis applied in its practice. “The radicality of this forgetting – Milner claims – is what Lacan called foreclosure.”²⁵ But since the subject is what emerges in the tumbling of the dice at the instant when contingency is about to morph into necessity, and since the subject-as-lack is what is at the core of truth as a cause in scientific endeavour, “suture and foreclosure are necessarily the suture and foreclosure of the subject.”²⁶

Jacques-Alain Miller and Suture

The Lacanian argument according to which scientific rationality structurally involves a misrecognition/erasure of the function of the subject – i.e. a foreclosure – can be found, skilfully argued, in an early text by Jacques-Alain Miller from the mid-1960s. First presented as a paper at the 9th session (24 February 1965) of Lacan’s Seminar XII (*Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis*), *La Suture: Éléments de la logique du signifiant*, “the first great Lacanian text not to be written by Lacan himself,”²⁷ constitutes the perfect completion of *Science and Truth* in addressing

²² Jacques Lacan, *Science and Truth*, op. cit., p. 733.

²³ *Idem*, p. 737.

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 738.

²⁵ Jean-Claude Milner, “The Doctrine of Science,” op. cit., p. 54.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Alain Badiou, *Number and Numbers*, Polity, Cambridge 2008, p. 25.

the complex relationship between Lacanianism and science. The term *suture*, investigated by Miller in the text, was mentioned by Lacan several times during Seminar XI in 1964, but never thoroughly theorized. It was therefore Miller's task in this article, also included in the first issue of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, to rigorously define the concept.

With the term *suture* Miller understands "the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse."²⁸ With this text he wants to conceptually ground the act of cancellation that the discourse of science operates on the subject of the unconscious and at the same time to generalize this very procedure in the way any subject relates to the signifier chain. As in the erasure of contingency in its conversion into necessity, the *punctum* of the enunciation of the subject (the "trembling of the dice") is at the same time the fundamental operational gesture for setting the machine of science into motion and that element the forgetting of which is inevitable once the discourse of science is established. Why is there this apparent contradiction for an element that is at the same time necessary and rejected? Because the cancellation act is never entirely successful, and it cannot be: some remainders, some symptoms, some stains, will always hijack the discourse of science, exposing its proclaimed universality to the contestation of the formations of the unconscious. The subject of the unconscious is thus always operative; the discourse of science, though, refuses to recognize its truth and therefore rejects it while not wanting to know anything about it.

In order to prove his argument, as an object of analysis Miller takes the scientific discourse of Gottlob Frege's *Foundations of Arithmetic*. His thesis is that in Frege's theory of the constitution of the series of natural numbers "in the genesis of progression, the function of the subject, miscognized, is operative."²⁹ Let us see what Miller's argument is regarding this specific scientific discourse.

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Frege's logicist system tries to found the sequence of natural numbers: faithful to his anti-empiricism, he deals only with concepts deprived of any external referent. It is an autonomous construction of logic through itself. He therefore cannot not rely on a primacy of a thing that then has to be subsumed by a concept (i.e. like counting an external already existing object). The first problem is that

²⁸ Jacques-Alain Miller, "La Suture: Éléments de la logique du signifiant," in *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, no. 1, 1966, p. 39.

²⁹ *Idem*, p. 40.

even before a concept can subsume an object, it has to be explained how the object is transformed into a unit. In order to become numerable, the object as an empirical referent has to disappear. Frege defines the unit with a redoubled concept of identity (“the number assigned to the concept F is the extension of the concept ‘identical to the concept F’”) by borrowing Leibniz’s definition of identity: *eadem sunt quorum unum potest substitui alteri salva veritate* (those things are identical of which one can be substituted for the other without loss of truth). Leibniz’s *salva veritate* thus rests on the concept of *self-identity*: truth can be said only of things that are identical to themselves, and conversely, the confirmation of self-identity preserves truth.

According to Miller, Frege’s system relies on a performative contradiction. On one hand, if a thing is not identical to itself, the whole logical edifice collapses (truth is not saved), on the other hand, non-self identity has to be evoked, even for an instant, in order to found the redoubling of self-identity. Truth is thus founded on a simultaneous invocation-and-exclusion of the non self-identical. In other words, if we supposed that an object were not self-identical, it would entirely subvert truth given that the principle ‘A is A’ is the law of any possible truth. No object should thus fall under the concept “not identical to itself,” which is therefore void. In order for this very principle of not-self-identity to be rejected, it must first have previously been posed. Miller’s fundamental argument, which will constitute a fundamental building block for the Lacanian logic of the signifier chain, regards the foundation of the logical edifice thusly:

in the autonomous construction of the logical through itself, it has been necessary, in order to exclude any reference to the real, to evoke on the level of the concept an object not-identical-with itself, to be subsequently rejected from the dimension of truth.³⁰

Miller wants to keep the anti-empiricist stance of Frege’s logicist system with its refusal to presuppose any extra-logical real, while at the same time highlighting the point of *internal* exclusion that founds this very system (following the model of the Möbius strip). Zero is the number that will be at the same time present and absent. Or better stated, it will be *counted as absence* (“the first non-real

³⁰ *Idem*, p. 45.

thing in thought”³¹). Referring to a category with no members, zero is by definition void; nevertheless it is *a* category, and in being such it can effectively be *counted*. With such an operation the number 1 is produced, and through the repetition of the same procedure, also all the other natural numbers. In this movement, the *mark* of the non-self-identical forms the foundation of the signifying chain of numbers.

Miller concludes by establishing a logical priority of 0 over 1. Self-identity has as its origin a mark of non-self-identity. But in order for self-identity to emerge, while preserving the consistency of truth, it is necessary for the non-self-identity to not only be elided, but actually *repressed*. Miller here applies a short circuit between the active causality of the non-self-identity in founding the sequence, and its disappearance in the progression of the natural numbers/signifying chain. The *truth* caused by the action of a lack (*truth-as-lack*) is reversed in a rejection of the dimension of truth from the scientific discourse (*the lack-of-truth*). The subject of the unconscious is that non-self-identical lack, which the discourse of science summons and rejects, wanting to know nothing of it:

To designate [this operation] I choose the name suture. Suture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse; we shall see that it figures there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in [*tenant-lieu*]. For, while there lacking, it is not purely and simply absent. Suture, by extension – the general relation of lack to the structure – of which it is an element, inasmuch as it implies the position of a taking-the-place-of [*tenant-lieu*].³²

In delineating the concept of suture Miller establishes what will become a Lacanian canon: from now on, the relation that the subject-as-lack entertains with the signifier chain (and if we follow the definition of science as a reduction of the Real to the realm of the signifier, also with the discourse of science in general) will be understood as follows. The subject-as-lack is the hidden and repressed causality of the signifier chain that is nevertheless always operative in the dialectic of substitution and permutations of the elements. The never ending slipping of the chain is none other than the causality miscognized but nevertheless *not-absent* of the lack. The subject may thus seem absent: the chain of scientific

³¹ *Idem*, p. 44.

³² *Idem*, p. 40.

signifiers seems to be perfectly self-sufficient. But it is all an ideological mystification. In fact, if we look closely – the Lacanian would say – we are able to see that the subject is far from being absent: it is just *stitched* in the very progression of the chain with the always different stand-in (*lieu-tenant*) that presentifies its presence-as-absence (its being-counted-as-absence). The subject is therefore neither present nor absent: it rather constitutes the *truth* of the signifier chain. It is *sutured* at the chain.

This triplet of terms – lack, subject, and truth – constitutes a dimension of incompatibility with the discourse of science. Lacan concludes *Science and Truth* with an unambiguous claim regarding science's rejection of the dimension of truth:

[O]ur science's prodigious fecundity must be examined in relation to the fact, sustaining science, that science does-not-want-to-know-anything about the truth as cause. You may recognize therein my formulation of *Verwerfung* or "foreclosure," which forms a closed series here with *Verdrängung*, "repression," and *Verneinung*, "negation," whose function in magic and religion I have indicated in passing.³³

As Lacan says earlier in the text: the "point [of truth] is veiled in science."³⁴ Such a rejection of truth must place science in the field of an imaginary ideology, structurally ignorant of the causal dimension of lack. The transmission of its knowledge is reduced to the level of communication. In this field where contingency is forgotten, where there is a blind miscognition of the presence/absence of the subject, where the Real is arrogantly proclaimed to be reduced to a perfectly transmissible sequence of signifiers, psychoanalysis cannot but play the role of analysis of the symptoms of science with a very unappealing conceptual consequence. Science in the arguments of Milner, Miller, and Lacan's *Science and Truth* is a field that is not able to recognize where its *foundation* actually lies: that is, in the causal dimension of truth-as-lack (or as subject). The scientific discourse cannot be self-sufficient if not as an ideology, because its foundation lies in what it is rejected from its field. Miller's analysis of Frege is in this regard a straightforward argument in favour of a foundational theory of science by the subject of the unconscious: the *o* – the non-self-identity, i.e. the subject – is *primary* and *foundational* regarding the *1* of self-identity. Following this line of

³³ Jacques Lacan, *Science and Truth*, op. cit., p. 742.

³⁴ *Idem*, p. 738.

thought, psychoanalysis ends up placing itself in a position of mastery toward science: no matter what its concepts or propositions are, science will never be able to generate truths. Truth and science are on two separate planes that never cross each other: they rather lie intertwined in a Möbius strip, as Lacan loves to say. The problem is that the three-dimensional point of view able to theorize on the relation between science and truth is firmly occupied by psychoanalysis as a theory: in this case, weirdly close to what Lacan always forbade it from being. A metalanguage.

The axiomatization of psychoanalysis

If we follow the elaboration of the previously discussed Lacanians regarding the relationship between psychoanalysis and science, it seems that we have arrived at a cul-de-sac. In what risks being a portrait painted with excessively dark tones, there might be an alternative route, which while not resolving the issue might at least help reformulate the problem in a more productive way. While the concept of *suture* risks reducing the field of scientific practice to a mere imaginary foreclosure of the causal dimension of truth, what might assist in a reconsideration of the problem is none other than the minimal definition of the subject of modern science developed by Descartes and re-proposed by Lacan in the first half of *Science and Truth*.

It is not difficult in fact to note a shift from the subtractive gesture of the Cartesian *cogito* to the theory of the productivity of the lack in the causality of the structure. While the former movement is characterized by a rejection of any positive knowledge in order to isolate a void, in the latter we have a lack that lies at the base of the productive machine of positive knowledge. While the Cartesian subject is a *nothing* that has to be produced through the practice of the de-imaginarization (or de-ideologization) of a positivity (in Althusserian terms, an epistemological break), the action of the lack is an underlying, yet apparently rejected, hidden cause that founds, through a short-circuit between a level and a meta-level, positive – and by definition ideological – knowledge. The problem of the relation between psychoanalysis and science cannot evade the question of whether the object of a scientific endeavour is the positive construction of knowledge, as is ideologically claimed by Miller and Milner, or rather the productive isolation of a thought through a procedure of subtractive formalization. The consequences of such a problem are pivotal for a theory of the subject of

science, deprived of the confusion that the term “subject” and “science” might engender when not carefully defined, as is in the case of the Millerian theory of suture. The difference between the two definitions of science is that in the first case the subject is a logical presupposition that lies at the core of all already existing knowledge: it is the truth-as-a-foundation that provides the conditions of possibility of every proposition and every object. In the second case, which can be called Cartesian, the subject is a hypothesis, or even better a *task* that has to be effectively rendered operative through a series of operations of de-imaginarization and de-ideologization.

Alain Badiou, in *Marque et manque: à propos du zéro*, an article from 1969 from the last issue of *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, gives a compelling and convincing critique of the Millerian understanding of the concept of suture in not dissimilar terms. According to Badiou, the relation that a subject entertains with the chain of its discourse can be called *suture* only when these discourses are not genuinely scientific. In a dialectic between ideological closure – when the subject appears as a *cause* of the scientific chain in the typical Lacanian short-circuit between level and meta-level – and a scientific rupture which operates a constant de-suturing,³⁵ Badiou coherently defines an ideal universal science as an autonomous machine completely deprived of any cause, and therefore of any subject:

There is no subject of science. Infinitely stratified, regulating its passages, science is pure space, with neither reverse nor mark nor place for what it excludes. A foreclosure, but one of nothing, may be called a psychosis of no subject – and therefore of all: universal by full right, a shared delirium, it is enough to hold oneself within it to no longer be anyone, anonymously dispersed in the hierarchy of orders. Science is an Outside without a blind spot.³⁶

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Here Badiou understands the term subject in the ideological (or Millerian) sense: as the alleged structural lack of the scientific discourse that ends up constituting the foundational cause of it. Science, on the contrary, is the progressive operation of de-ideologization and de-imaginarization that excludes the ideological operator of *subject* from its field until the regulative-ideal point of an “infinite

³⁵ Zachary Luke Fraser, *Introduction to Alain Badiou, The Concept of Model. An Introduction to the Materialist Epistemology of Mathematics*, re.press, Melbourne 2007, pp. xiii – lxv.

³⁶ Alain Badiou, “Marque et manque: à propos du zéro,” in *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, no. 10, 1969, pp. 161-162.

stratification,” a “pure space,” or a “psychosis”: a point where science would be completely free from any ideological recuperation (a “machinic universalism,” as Zachary Luke Fraser defines it³⁷). But if we understand the term subject not in the imaginary or ideological sense, but in the subtractive and Cartesian sense, we see that this very act of an epistemological break is none other than the process of the reduction of the positivity of ideological knowledge to the productivity of the pure void. In other words, it is the process of questioning the positivity of the Imaginary in order for the subtraction of the pure thought-as-void to emerge. Psychoanalysis has too often been crudely reduced to the practice of hermeneutical analysis of an already-existing subject of the unconscious (“it is down there, we just have to dig into the psyche in order to take it out”) as if it were a homunculus placed inside of a human being. But the subject of the unconscious, if we follow the subtractive, non-substantial, and Cartesian definition given by Lacan, is not something that is already there from the outset; it rather has to be *produced* during the experience of analysis. At the beginning of an analysis it is necessarily a hypothesis. In this sense, psychoanalysis could be coherently defined as a machine in order for the pure void of the unconscious – the subtraction from any ideological positivity of knowledge – to emerge: at the *end*, not at the beginning. It is a technique for helping the rigorous counterintuitive de-suturing operation of the scientific machine. Psychoanalysis is not a technique for giving a series of enigmatic signifiers a positive signification, but it is rather a way to get rid of any pretension of signification: to isolate the pure subtractive gesture of the *resistance to positive signification*.

The problem of the subjective experience of psychoanalysis is rather that the tendency to reduce the pure *nothingness* of the surface to the deepness of meaning is extremely strong; and it is precisely what concerns the intricacies of the register of the Imaginary. A formation of the unconscious can only be partially reduced to a certain interpretation during psychoanalysis. An analytic interpretation is by definition always insufficient (and this is the reason why Lacanian analysts have the tendency to remain silent and to avoid giving a meaning to a symptom), but the sequence and the multiplicity of wrong interpretations session after session expose in a progressively clear way the fact that there is something that cannot be reduced to interpretation: something which remains

³⁷ Zachary Luke Fraser, *Introduction to Alain Badiou, The Concept of Model. An Introduction to the Materialist Epistemology of Mathematics*, op. cit., p. xlix.

stubbornly on the surface. What happens when, after many years of analysis, an analysand starts to be able to circumscribe the kernel of the symptom that is reluctant to be reduced to a meaning is none other than the tiring acceptance of a *nothingness*; or in better terms, the personal construction of this *nothingness*. Many Lacanians define the circumscription of the un-analysable kernel of an analysis *sinthome*, borrowing a term used by Lacan in his seminars of the late Seventies. But this term, which had a certain function within the progression of Lacan's teaching, has been almost unanimously taken as an ultimate (and singular) proof of a re-substantialization of this void in what became a bizarre version of a materialism of *jouissance*.

The contribution that science can make to psychoanalysis is precisely the rigorous conceptualization of this gesture of subtraction from knowledge. Science, and in particular mathematics, is in fact able to provide transmissible constructability to this *nothing*. While psychoanalysis (in this sense, closer to politics than science) is able to de-ideologize and de-imaginarize the stubborn tendency of the individual to rely on a sequence of positive signification and to isolate the kernel of ultimate resistance to meaning, science is actually able to construct a sequence of thoughts and concepts on this nothing. Mathematics is the proof that the *nothing* that we isolate at the end of an analysis is not the ultimate word of psychoanalysis: this is the reason why until the end of his life Lacan never gave up on the question of the transmissibility of the unconscious. That gesture of subtraction cannot end with an individual (or subjective, there is no difference at this level) conglomerate of bodily *jouissance*, defined as *sinthome*. This cynical outcome – which unfortunately became dominant in a Lacanian community progressively hegemonized by the primacy of a clinic which increasingly resembles the primacy of the “cure” – cannot contemplate the fact that upon this very *nothingness* something can still be done and still be constructed. Science maintains the promise of a possible collective outcome for the – otherwise unjustly accused – individuality of the experience of analysis. The *void* at the end of analysis is not a therapeutic goal, but rather a starting point for constructing an edifice of concepts. Psychoanalysis is, in a word, a propaedeutic for a de-ideologized science.

The concept of *axiom* can be an appropriate way to explain how concretely a re-framing of the question of the relationship between psychoanalysis and science, thought and knowledge, subject and ideology, subtraction and positivity

can look. The *axiom* indicates a procedure according to which a spontaneous (i.e. ideological) definition of a certain object is progressively deprived of any intuitive presuppositions and reduced to a minimal group of properties which are the ones given by the chosen system (and not more). Contrary to the Euclidean model of axiomatization, which started from the self-evidence of a certain ensemble of concepts (e.g. line, point, etc.), the formal axiomatic does not rely on any spontaneous or ideological presupposed definition. It actually produces its own elements and concepts by itself. Here we can see how the Badiouian stratification of a scientific machine with no outside, as was addressed in *Marque et manqué*, might look. But how it is possible to clean the spontaneous understanding of certain concepts in order to arrive at a formal axiomatization? Gabriele Lolli explains it in this way:

At first, you take some rough analogies from already known domains, like physics: for example, in order to refer to the topological notions invented by Cantor, what might the word “dense” suggest when referring to the distribution of the points of a set? Does it mean that the points “touch” themselves? But the points cannot touch themselves even if they are very close. We can say that there are many of them in a small space, but in fact we should say that there are infinite points. And that is not even enough. If we take an example from everyday life and from the distribution of populations: to explain the density we can think of the inhabitants of a neighbourhood, but that is not enough; we can think of the roommates of an apartment, but that is not enough; we can think that in every room there is at least one person, but that is not enough; we can think that in every square meter there is at least one person, until the area tends to zero. After a certain point we have to abandon the analogy with real populations. Infinity imposes conditions that go beyond any confrontation with the finite world.³⁸

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Little by little, when the conditions start to become more and more precise through a formal sequence of operations, they become sufficient to make the properties explicit. When we reach this point, the spontaneous ideological definitions of the elements are no longer taken into consideration. A notion is formed from and depends *only* on the explicit characteristics and not the ones that are alluded to or not mentioned. The same thing happens with the definition of the concept *set* in set theory: maybe at first we have to define it as

³⁸ Gabriele Lolli, *Dagli insiemi ai numeri*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1994, p. 23.

a collection of different elements, but then it becomes clear that the elements belonging to a set are a set themselves, and the primary definition of what a set is must be abandoned. What a set is – at that point – will no longer be a primary definition, but an internal production of the axiomatic system itself. As if the set were a *creation* of the axiomatic system.

This procedure, according to which a formal element is first considered in its analogical relation with something external to itself and little by little this definition is abandoned when the properties of the system become clear, is none other than the procedure of de-ideologization and de-imaginarization. The relation between psychoanalysis and science relies precisely on this common operational status: in order to arrive at a pure mathematical machine we have to get rid of any presumption of signification and relation to an external referent (we have to subtract from any empirical referent). But while psychoanalysis arrives at the point where the subtractive production of a *nothingness* is guaranteed with a technical procedure of de-imaginarization, mathematics is actually able to make *something* out of this *nothingness*: the creative invention of concepts and thoughts. One of the characteristics of modern mathematics is that mathematical entities are introduced by creative definitions that are not linked to any external or empirical given. But in order to reach this domain of subtraction from the empirical realm, we have to undergo a procedure of elimination of the pretension of the Imaginary to reduce the surface to meaning and signification. As Alain Badiou once said at a conference³⁹: “the problem of mathematics is not that is too difficult, but rather that is too simple. It is only letters. It is too much on the surface.” The problem is rather: how to inhabit this surface? How to eliminate the ideological profundity of the Self in order to isolate that *void* that can help us to creatively inhabit the domain of thought? Psychoanalysis is a historical model (certainly open to ameliorations and emendations) for concretely posing this question. Or better stated, psychoanalysis is the political way to produce the subject of the unconscious that is the same as the subject of science.

³⁹ Alain Badiou, *Lacan & Philosophy*, University of California – Los Angeles, 27 May 2010 (accessible online at: <http://ect.humnet.ucla.edu/video>).